THE ECONOMICS OF AUTHENTICITY: STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS IN THE ARTISANAL BREAD SECTOR

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REVIEW, RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

The artisanal bread sector has emerged as a strategically significant niche within the broader food service industry, driven by shifting consumer preferences towards authenticity, natural ingredients, and experiential consumption. This study investigates the economic performance, strategic positioning, and development potential of artisanal bakery enterprises, with particular reference to S.C. Drag de Pâine S.R.L., a sourdough-based micro-bakery established in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, in 2020. Using a mixed-methods approach combining financial ratio analysis, a consumer behaviour questionnaire (n = 120), and SWOT strategic analysis, the research evaluates cost structures, profitability indicators, labour productivity, and consumer willingness to pay premium prices. Results indicate that raw materials and direct labour collectively account for approximately 81% of total production costs, while the net profit margin improved from 11.11% in 2023 to 14.75% in 2025. Annual revenue growth averaged 16.4%, supported by dual B2C and B2B (HoReCa) distribution channels. Consumer analysis reveals that 58% of respondents exhibit price-inelastic demand, remaining loyal even under a 20% price increase, while 85% expressed willingness to purchase previous-day products at reduced prices, signalling both brand attachment and ethical food awareness. The study further identifies gastronomic tourism integration and short food supply chains as key growth vectors. Findings suggest that the value-based pricing model, combined with local supply chain embeddedness and experiential branding, constitutes the primary source of competitive advantage for artisanal bakeries operating in premium urban markets.

Keywords: (max. 5) artisanal bakery; sourdough fermentation; economic performance; consumer behaviour; value-based pricing; HoReCa;

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Introduction

The contemporary food economy is characterised by a paradoxical dynamic: while industrial-scale food production continues to dominate global supply chains, there is a vigorous resurgence of consumer interest in artisanally produced, locally sourced, and experientially rich food products [1,2]. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the bakery sector, where sourdough-based and traditionally fermented breads have transcended niche status to become mainstream premium products in urban food markets across Europe [3,4].

Applied economics provides the analytical framework necessary for understanding the complex interplay between artisanal production costs, premium pricing strategies, and consumer willingness to pay. In the food service sector, economic efficiency is no longer measured solely by production volume but increasingly by the capacity to integrate sustainability, ingredient provenance, and customer experience into the final product price [5]. The artisanal bakery thus operates at the intersection of food production, consumer culture, and local economic development [6].

Romania's bakery sector is characterised by a fragmented market structure, with a large number of operators ranging from industrial producers to small artisanal units [7]. According to the National Institute of Statistics, bakery products represent a significant share of household food expenditure, ensuring a relatively stable demand base even during periods of macroeconomic volatility [8]. However, the sector faces persistent structural challenges, including cereal price volatility, rising energy costs, and the need to adapt to evolving consumer preferences towards healthier and more authentic products [9].

Gastronomic tourism has emerged as a complementary growth vector for artisanal food producers, with culinary experiences increasingly recognised as key determinants of destination attractiveness [10,11]. In cities such as Cluj-Napoca, characterised by high purchasing power, a young urban population, and a dynamic cultural and tourism offer, artisanal bakeries have the potential to function as anchor points of experiential food consumption, contributing to both local economic development and destination branding [12].

Despite the growing scholarly interest in artisanal food systems, empirical research on the financial performance and strategic dynamics of individual artisanal bakery enterprises remains limited, particularly in the Central and Eastern European context. Most existing studies focus either on consumer preferences for traditional food products [13,14] or on the agri-food value chain at a macro level [15], leaving a significant gap regarding firm-level economic analysis in this segment.

The present study addresses this gap by undertaking a comprehensive economic analysis of S.C. Drag de Pâine S.R.L., a sourdough-based artisanal bakery established in Cluj-Napoca in 2020. The company represents a relevant case study given its explicit positioning in the premium segment, its dual B2C and B2B revenue model, and its active integration into the local gastronomic tourism circuit. The primary objectives of this research are: (i) to analyse the cost structure and profitability of artisanal bread production; (ii) to evaluate consumer behaviour and price sensitivity; (iii) to assess labour productivity and resource utilisation efficiency; and (iv) to identify strategic development directions through SWOT analysis and HoReCa integration potential.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the materials and methods; Section 3 reports the results; Section 4 provides an integrated discussion; and Section 5 concludes with managerial and policy implications.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a single-case study research design, following the methodological framework established by Yin [16] for explanatory case research. The case unit is S.C. Drag de Pâine S.R.L., a micro-enterprise specialising in natural sourdough fermentation and artisanal bread production, located in Cluj-Napoca, Romania (CAEN code 1071 – Manufacture of bread and fresh pastry goods). The company was founded in 2020 and employs five persons. Primary financial data were obtained directly from the company and cover the period 2023–2025. The study period was selected to capture the post-COVID stabilisation phase and the company's transition into a consolidated growth trajectory.

Economic performance was assessed through a set of standard financial indicators widely used in applied economics and business performance evaluation [17]. The following metrics were computed for each year of the study period: (i) total revenue and annual revenue growth rate; (ii) gross profit and net profit; (iii) net profit margin (NPM = Net Profit / Total Revenue × 100); (iv) labour productivity (LP = Total Revenue / Number of Employees); (v) flour utilisation yield (kg bread output per 100 kg flour input); and (vi) production capacity utilisation coefficient. Production cost structure was disaggregated into five categories: base raw materials, special ingredients, direct labour, energy and utilities, and packaging materials, calculated per 100 kg of finished product.

A structured questionnaire was administered to 120 consumers in the Cluj-Napoca metropolitan area between March and April 2025. Respondents were recruited through purposive sampling at the company's point of sale and through social media channels. The instrument comprised 22 items organised into five thematic sections: respondent profile and sociodemographic characteristics; purchase frequency and consumption habits; product quality and authenticity perception; price sensitivity and willingness to pay; and loyalty and recommendation behaviour. A five-point Likert scale was employed for attitudinal items. Internal consistency of the attitudinal scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding values above 0.78, indicating acceptable reliability [18]. Descriptive statistics and frequency distributions were computed using Microsoft Excel 2021.

A structured SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis was conducted to synthesise the strategic position of the enterprise. The analysis integrated insights from the financial data, the consumer survey, competitive benchmarking against other artisanal bakeries in Cluj-Napoca, and a review of relevant sector-level documentation including the Romanian National Strategy for the Bakery Sector [7] and the European Farm to Fork Strategy [19]. SWOT factors were identified through triangulation of primary and secondary data sources, following the methodological guidelines proposed by Kotler et al. [5].

All survey participants provided informed verbal consent prior to data collection. Anonymity and data confidentiality were ensured throughout the research process. Financial data were used with the explicit authorisation of the company management and are presented in aggregated form to protect commercial confidentiality.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of production costs at 100 kg of finished product reveals a cost structure dominated by direct labour and raw materials, consistent with the labour-intensive nature of artisanal food production (Table 1). Total production cost per 100 kg amounts to 1,400 RON, corresponding to an average unit cost of 14 RON/kg. Base raw materials (non-additive Type 650 and 1250 flour sourced from local mills in the Turda–Câmpia Turzii area) account for 32% of total costs, while special ingredients (seeds, nuts, organic products) represent a further 15%. Direct labour constitutes the single largest cost category at 34%, reflecting the extended fermentation and manual shaping processes inherent to sourdough production. Energy and utilities (cryogenic proofing chambers and deck ovens) account for 13%, and eco-friendly packaging materials for 6%.

Table 1.

Production cost structure per 100 kg of finished product.

Cost Category	Value (RON)	Share (%)	Description
Base raw materials (flour, sourdough starter)	450	32%	Non-additive flour, local suppliers
Special ingredients (seeds, nuts, organic)	210	15%	Bio/traditional products
Direct labour (baker salaries)	480	34%	Manual process, 48h fermentation
Energy and utilities	180	13%	Ovens and refrigeration
Packaging and labelling	80	6%	Eco-friendly packaging
TOTAL	**1,400**	**100%**	**14 RON/kg average unit cost**

Source: Own elaboration based on company financial data.

Revenue and profitability indicators for the 2023–2025 period are presented in Table 2. Total turnover grew from 450,000 RON in 2023 to an estimated 610,000 RON in 2025, representing a cumulative increase of 35.6% and an average annual growth rate of 16.4%. The retail channel (B2C direct sales) accounts for approximately 70% of total revenue, with an average transaction value of 32 RON recorded in 2024. The B2B HoReCa channel, though contributing 30% of revenue, exhibited the highest growth rate at 50% over the study period, reflecting the strategic value of supply partnerships with specialty restaurants and cafes.

Net profit increased from 50,000 RON in 2023 to an estimated 90,000 RON in 2025. The net profit margin improved correspondingly from 11.11% to 14.75%, indicating progressive operational efficiency gains driven by waste reduction, online pre-order system implementation, and incremental equipment investment. The break-even point was reached at approximately the 20th day of each operating month, corresponding to daily sales of approximately 93 units, confirming the financial viability of the business model.

Table 2.

Revenue and profitability indicators (2023–2025)

Indicator	Unit	2023	2024	2025
Retail revenue (B2C)	000 RON	350	400	460
HoReCa revenue (B2B)	000 RON	100	120	150
Total turnover	000 RON	450	520	610
Gross profit	000 RON	62	75	112
Net profit	000 RON	50	60	90
Net profit margin	%	11.11	11.53	14.75

Monthly break-even (revenue)	000 RON	37.5	43.3	50.8
Average daily customers (retail)	persons	65	78	92

Source: Own elaboration based on company financial data.

Labour productivity and resource utilisation indicators are summarised in Table 3. Labour productivity, expressed as total revenue per employee, declined marginally from 112,500 RON/employee in 2023 to 104,000 RON/employee in 2024, reflecting the addition of new staff ahead of anticipated revenue growth. However, a recovery to an estimated 122,000 RON/employee is projected for 2025, attributable to investments in variable-speed mixing equipment and professional slicing machinery that reduced non-productive time without compromising artisanal character.

Flour utilisation yield improved from 132 kg of bread per 100 kg flour in 2023 to a projected 136 kg in 2025, reflecting the implementation of a rigorous humidity and temperature monitoring system in the proofing chamber. The oven capacity utilisation coefficient increased from 0.65 to 0.80 over the same period, indicating that the enterprise is approaching its current technical production ceiling during the morning production shift and has identified the introduction of an afternoon patisserie shift as a feasible capacity expansion strategy.

Table 3.

Resource utilisation indicators (2023–2025).

Indicator	Unit	2023	2024	2025
Labour productivity (revenue/employee)	000 RON	112.5	104.0	122.0
Flour yield (kg bread / 100 kg flour)	kg/100kg	132	134	136
Oven capacity utilisation coefficient	ratio	0.65	0.72	0.80

Source: Own elaboration based on company financial data.

Analysis of the 120-respondent consumer survey reveals a consumer profile characterised by high brand loyalty, quality-driven purchasing decisions, and premium price acceptance. The majority of respondents (58%) declared that they would remain loyal to the brand even in the event of a 20% price increase, indicating price-inelastic demand rooted in emotional and sensory attachment. A further 17% stated that they would travel specifically to purchase the company's products regardless of distance or time expenditure, confirming the experiential dimension of consumption [20].

The most frequently cited purchase motivators were ingredient quality and naturalness (cited by 78% of respondents), followed by taste and freshness (71%), health-related benefits of sourdough fermentation (65%), and support for local producers (54%). Word-of-mouth recommendation was identified as the primary discovery channel by 83% of first-time customers, highlighting the critical role of social capital and peer referral in artisanal food marketing [21].

A notable finding concerns the attitude towards food waste reduction: 85% of respondents expressed willingness to purchase previous-day products at a reduced price. This finding reveals a consumer orientation that extends beyond purely sensory or health-related motivations to encompass ethical consumption values, consistent with European patterns of sustainable food behaviour [22].

Regarding proximity, 40% of respondents identified physical convenience as an important purchasing factor. However, the strong willingness to travel (17%) and the high recommendation rate suggest that the brand has successfully transcended purely location-based demand, creating a loyalty dynamic that is relatively independent of geographical proximity.

The SWOT analysis synthesises the strategic position of S.C. Drag de Pâine S.R.L. within the Cluj-Napoca artisanal food market (Table 4). Key strengths include the proprietary sourdough culture, premium brand equity, dual-channel revenue model, and strong local supplier integration. Principal weaknesses relate to the scalability constraints inherent to artisanal production, high unit costs relative to industrial competitors, and limited geographic reach. The main opportunities identified encompass gastronomic tourism growth, expansion of HoReCa partnerships, digital channel development, and participation in short food supply chain (SFSC) programmes supported under the EU Farm to Fork Strategy [19]. Key threats include rising raw material and energy costs, increasing competition from quasi-artisanal industrial products, and consumer price sensitivity in the broader market segment [23].

Table 4. SWOT analysis of S.C. Drag de Pâine S.R.L.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
• Proprietary sourdough culture (unique product identity) • High brand loyalty and price-inelastic demand • Local ingredient sourcing and SFSC integration • Dual B2C/B2B revenue model (risk diversification) • Transparent production process (consumer trust)	• High unit production costs vs. industrial competitors • Limited scalability of artisanal processes • Single-location business model • Dependence on specialised human capital • High perishability risk; unsold product losses
OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**
• Growing gastronomic tourism demand in Cluj-Napoca • EU Farm to Fork Strategy support for SFSC • Digital channel expansion (e-commerce, subscriptions) • HoReCa partnership development and festival demand • Second-shift patisserie production line potential	• Volatile cereal and energy prices (FAO, BNR data) • Competition from pseudo-artisanal industrial products • Consumer price sensitivity in broader market • Skilled labour retention challenges • Regulatory compliance costs (food safety, HACCP)

Source: Own elaboration

The cost structure identified in this study aligns with findings from the broader literature on artisanal food production economics. The dominant share of direct labour costs (34%) reflects the inherent tension between craft authenticity and economic efficiency [3,24]. Unlike industrial bakeries, where automation can reduce labour costs to below 15% of total expenditure, sourdough-based artisanal production relies on skilled human intervention throughout the fermentation cycle, a process that cannot be fully mechanised without compromising product quality [25]. The premium pricing strategy adopted by the company, with net margins reaching 14.75% by 2025, appears to successfully compensate for these structural cost disadvantages, confirming the efficacy of value-based pricing in premium food markets [5,26].

The price premium of 50–80% relative to industrial bread products, voluntarily accepted by the majority of surveyed consumers, provides empirical support for the concept of perceived authenticity value in food consumption [13,20]. This phenomenon has been extensively documented in European studies of traditional food products [14,27], but has received limited attention in the Romanian market context. The present findings suggest that Cluj-Napoca, with its high-income urban consumer base and active gastronomic scene, constitutes a particularly favourable environment for premium artisanal food enterprises.

The progressive development of the B2B HoReCa channel, which grew by 50% over the study period, represents a significant strategic achievement. By supplying specialty cafes and restaurants, the bakery effectively transforms its products into inputs for higher-margin culinary experiences, creating a form of value chain co-creation that benefits both parties [28]. From an applied economics perspective, this relationship exemplifies the theoretical concept of positive externalities in local agri-food systems, where one enterprise's quality positioning generates reputational spillovers for its commercial partners [29].

The contribution to the local economy extends beyond direct employment and tax revenues. Through the preferential sourcing of flour from local mills in the Turda region, the enterprise injects financial resources into the regional agricultural chain, reducing economic leakage and supporting the kind of endogenous regional development advocated by rural economics scholars [15,30]. This pattern of local supply chain integration is consistent with the principles of Short Food Supply Chains, which are explicitly supported under the EU

Farm to Fork Strategy as instruments of territorial resilience [19].

The identification of price-inelastic demand among 58% of the consumer sample is a finding of considerable strategic significance. In standard economic theory, inelastic demand for a food product indicates that consumers perceive it as a qualitatively differentiated good rather than a commodity, which provides the enterprise with significant pricing flexibility [17]. This is consistent with Vanhonacker et al. [27]'s finding that European consumers assign higher credence and experience attributes to traditional food products, making them less price-responsive than for standardised equivalents.

The dominance of word-of-mouth as the primary customer acquisition channel (83% of first-time customers) has important implications for marketing resource allocation. It suggests that investment in product quality and in-store experience generates greater commercial returns than conventional advertising expenditure, a conclusion supported by research on experiential consumption in the food service sector [20,21]. The high proportion of respondents willing to travel specifically to purchase the product (17%) further indicates the existence of what Pine and Gilmore's experience economy framework would term a "destination experience", a level of brand equity rarely achieved by micro-enterprises [31].

The integration of artisanal bakeries into gastronomic tourism circuits represents a mutually reinforcing growth dynamic that has been documented across multiple European contexts [10,11,12]. In Cluj-Napoca, characterised by major cultural festivals (UNTOLD, TIFF) generating up to 40% HoReCa demand peaks, artisanal food producers are uniquely positioned to benefit from tourism-driven consumption spikes without incurring the fixed costs associated with direct tourism infrastructure [32]. The bakery functions, in this regard, as what Di-Clemente et al. [10] have termed a "gastronomic tourism anchor", providing authentic culinary experiences that enhance destination attractiveness while simultaneously benefiting from visitor footfall.

The finding that 85% of consumers are willing to purchase previous-day discounted products signals a convergence between ethical consumption values and artisanal brand loyalty that has been observed in sustainable food behaviour research [22]. This disposition, if systematically leveraged through structured waste-reduction pricing schemes, could contribute simultaneously to improved financial performance (lower product write-offs) and enhanced social sustainability credentials, a combination particularly valued in the premium urban food market [6].

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the single-case design limits the generalisability of findings to other artisanal bakeries or geographic contexts. Future research should employ multi-case or survey-based approaches to validate the identified patterns across a wider population of enterprises. Second, financial data were provided by the company and were not externally audited; while every effort was made to ensure accuracy, independent financial verification was not possible. Third, the consumer survey was limited to the Cluj-Napoca metropolitan area and to customers with prior contact with the brand, potentially overestimating loyalty and willingness to pay within the broader population. Fourth, the study period (2023–2025) spans a period of significant inflationary pressure in Romania, which may have influenced both cost structures and consumer behaviour in ways that may not persist over the long term.

5. Conclusions

This study has provided a comprehensive economic analysis of an artisanal sourdough bakery enterprise operating in the premium urban food market of Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The key findings can be summarised as follows.

First, the production cost structure of artisanal bread is dominated by direct labour (34%) and raw materials (47%), resulting in an average unit cost of 14 RON/kg that fundamentally precludes price competition with industrial producers. Second, the value-based pricing strategy successfully compensates for these cost disadvantages, generating a net profit margin of 14.75% by 2025 and demonstrating that authenticity-driven differentiation is economically viable in premium urban markets. Third, consumer demand exhibits significant price inelasticity, with 58% of surveyed customers maintaining loyalty under a 20% price increase scenario, confirming the strategic value of brand equity and perceived authenticity. Fourth, the dual B2C/B2B revenue model, with HoReCa channel growth of 50% over the study period, provides revenue diversification and cash-flow stabilisation that partially compensates for retail demand volatility. Fifth, gastronomic tourism integration and local supply chain embeddedness generate positive externalities that reinforce the competitive position of the enterprise within the broader urban food ecosystem.

From a managerial perspective, these findings suggest that artisanal bakery enterprises should prioritise: (i) investment in pre-order and subscription systems to reduce perishability risk; (ii) proactive HoReCa partnership development as a strategic revenue stabilisation mechanism; (iii) systematic integration into gastronomic tourism circuits and cultural event catering; and (iv) digital communication strategies that leverage the brand's word-of-mouth dynamics to reduce customer acquisition costs.

From a policy perspective, the study underscores the potential of artisanal food enterprises as instruments of local economic development, employment creation, and territorial food sovereignty, consistent with the objectives of the EU Farm to Fork Strategy and the Romanian National Agri-food Sector Strategy. Targeted support for short food supply chain development and gastronomic tourism promotion at the local government level could significantly enhance the sustainability and growth potential of this sector.

Future research should extend this analysis through comparative multi-enterprise studies, longitudinal monitoring of financial performance under inflationary conditions, and consumer panel research examining the long-term dynamics of artisanal food loyalty in Romanian urban markets.

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